

FACTS OF LIFE

By Ven. Narada Mahathera



e live in an ill-balanced world. It is not rosy, nor is it totally thorny. The rose is soft, beautiful and fragrant; but the stem on which the rose flower grows is full of thorns. Because of the rose, one tolerates the thorns. However, one will not disparage the rose on account of the thorns.

To an optimist, this world is absolutely rosy; to a pessimist, it is absolutely thorny. But to a realist, this world is neither absolutely rosy nor absolutely thorny. It abounds with both beautiful roses and prickly thorns.

An understanding person will not be infatuated by the beauty of the rose, but will view it as it is. Knowing well the nature of the thorns, he will view them as they are and will take the precaution not to be hurt.

Like the pendulum that perpetually moves from right to left, four desirable and four undesirable conditions prevail in this world. Everyone without

exception must face these conditions in the course of a lifetime. These conditions are:

- gain (*labha*) and loss (*alabha*),
- honour (*yasa*) and dishonour (*ayasa*),
- praise (*pasamsa*) and blame (*ninda*),
- happiness (*sukha*) and sorrow (*dukkha*).

Gain and Loss

Businessmen, as a rule, are subject to both gain and loss. It is quite natural to be complacent when there is gain or profit. In itself there is nothing wrong. Such profits produce a certain amount of pleasure which the average man seek. Without these pleasurable moments, however temporary, life would not be worth living. In this competitive and chaotic world, it is right that people should enjoy some kind of happiness which gladdens their hearts. Such happiness, though material, is conducive to health and longevity.

The problem arises in the case of loss. Profits are accepted smilingly, but not so the losses. The losses often lead to mental agony and sometimes suicidal tendencies arise when the losses are unbearable. It is under such adverse circumstances that one should exhibit high, moral courage and maintain a proper mental equilibrium. All of us have ups and downs while battling with life. One should be prepared for the good and the bad. Then there will be less disappointment.

In the time of the Buddha, a noble lady was offering food to the Venerable Sariputta and some monks.

While serving them, she received a note stating that certain misfortunes had affected her family. Without becoming upset, she calmly kept the note in her waist-pouch and served the monks as if nothing had happened. A maid who was carrying a pot of ghee to offer to the monks inadvertently slipped and broke the pot of ghee. Thinking that the lady would naturally feel sorry at the loss, Venerable Sariputta consoled her, saying that all breakable things are bound to break. The wise lady remarked. “*Bhante*, what is this trivial loss? I have just received a note stating certain misfortunes have occurred in my family. I accepted without losing my balance. I am serving you all despite the bad news.”

Such valour on the part of such a courageous lady should be highly commended.

Once the Buddha went seeking alms in a village. Owing to the intervention of Mara the Evil One, the Buddha did not obtain any food. When Mara questioned the Buddha rather sarcastically whether he was hungry or not, the Buddha solemnly explained the mental attitude of those who were free from impediments, and replied, “Ah, happily do we live, we who have no impediments. Feeders of joy shall we be even as the gods of the Radiant Realm.”

On another occasion, the Buddha and his disciples observed the rainy period (*vassa*) in a village at the invitation of a brahmin who, however, completely forgot his duty to attend to the needs of the Buddha and the Sangha. Throughout a period of three months, although

Venerable Moggallana volunteered to obtain food by his psychic powers, the Buddha making no complaint, was contented with the fodder of horses offered by a horse-dealer.

Losses one must try to bear cheerfully with manly vigour. Unexpectedly one confronts them, very often in groups and not singly. One must face them with equanimity (*upekkha*) and take it as an opportunity to cultivate that sublime virtue.

Honour and Dishonour

Honour and dishonour are another pair of inevitable worldly conditions that confront us in the course of our daily lives.

Honour or fame, we welcome; dishonour we dislike. Honour gladdens our heart; dishonour disheartens us. We desire to become famous. We long to see our pictures in the papers. We are greatly pleased when our activities, however insignificant, are given publicity. Sometimes we seek undue publicity too.

Many are anxious to see their pictures in a magazine at any cost. To obtain an honour, some are prepared to offer gratification or give substantial donations to those in power. For the sake of publicity, some exhibit their generosity by giving alms to a hundred monks and even more; but they may be totally indifferent to the sufferings of the poor and the needy in the neighbourhood.

These are human frailties. Most people have ulterior motives. Selfless persons who act disinterestedly

are rare in this world. Most worldlings have something up their sleeves. Well, who is perfectly good? How many are perfectly pure in their motives? How many are absolutely altruistic?

We need not hunt after fame or honour. If we are worthy of honour, it will come to us unsought. The bee will be attracted to the flower, laden with honey. The flower does not invite the bee.

True indeed, we naturally feel happy, nay, extremely happy when our fame is spread far and wide. But we must realize that fame, honour and glory are passing phases only. They soon vanish in thin air.

How about dishonour? It is not palatable either to the ear or mind. We are undoubtedly perturbed when unkind words of disrepute pierce our ears. The pain of mind is still greater when the so-called report is unjust and absolutely false.

Normally it takes years to erect a magnificent building. In a minute or two, with modern devastating weapons, it could easily be demolished. Sometimes it takes years or a lifetime to build up a good reputation. In no time the hard-earned good name can be ruined. Nobody is exempt from the devastating remark that begins with the ill-famed 'but'. Yes, he is very good; he does this and that, but his whole good record is blackened by the so-called 'but'. You may live the life of a Buddha but you will not be exempt from criticisms, attacks and insults.

The Buddha was the most famous and yet the most

malignant teacher in his time. Some antagonists of the Buddha spread a rumour that a woman used to spend the night in the monastery. Having failed in this base attempt, they spread false news amongst the populace that the Buddha and his disciples murdered that very woman and hid her corpse in the rubbish-heap of withered flowers within the monastery. The conspirators later admitted that they were the culprits.

When his historic mission met success and when many sought ordination under him, his adversaries maligned him, saying that he was robbing the mothers of their sons, depriving wives of their husbands, and that he was obstructing the progress of the nation.

Failing in all these attempts to ruin his noble character, his own cousin, Devadatta, a jealous disciple of his, attempted to kill him by hurling a rock from above, but failed in his attempt.

If such be the sad fate of the faultless, perfect Buddha, what can be the fate of imperfect ordinary mortals?

The higher you climb a hill, the more conspicuous you become in the eyes of others. Your back is revealed but your front is hidden. The fault-finding world exhibits your short-comings and misgivings but ignores your salient virtues. The winnowing fan thrashes the husks but retains the grains; the strainer, on the contrary, retains the gross remnants but drains out the sweet juice. The cultured take the subtle and remove the gross, the uncultured retain the gross, but remove the subtle.

When you are misrepresented, deliberately or otherwise, remember the advice of Epictetus: to think or say "O by his slight acquaintance and faint knowledge of myself, I am lightly criticized. But if I am known better, more serious and much greater would be the accusations against me."

It is needless to waste time in correcting the false reports unless circumstances compel you to necessitate a clarification. The enemy is gratified when he sees that you are hurt. That is what he actually expects. If you are indifferent, such misrepresentations will fall on deaf ears.

- In seeing the faults of others, we should behave like a blind person.
- In hearing unjust criticism of others, we should behave like a deaf person.
- In speaking ill of others, we should behave like a dumb person.
- It is not possible to put a stop to false accusations, reports and rumours.

The world is full of thorns and pebbles. It is impossible to remove them. But, if we have to walk in spite of such obstacles, instead of trying to remove them, which is impossible, it is advisable to wear a pair of slippers and walk harmlessly.

The Dhamma teaches:

- Be like a lion that trembles not at sounds.
- Be like the wind that does not cling to the meshes of a net.

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- Be like a lotus that is not contaminated by the mud from which it springs.
- Wander alone like a rhinoceros.
- Being the kings of the forest, lions are fearless. By nature they are not frightened by the roaring of other animals. In this world, we may hear adverse reports, false accusations, degrading remarks of uncurbed tongues. Like a lion, we should not even listen to them. Like the boomerang, false reports will end where they began.
- Dogs bark, but the caravans move on peacefully.
We are living in a muddy world. Numerous lotuses spring therefrom without being contaminated by the mud, they adorn the world. Like lotuses we should try to lead blameless and noble lives, unmindful of the mud that may be thrown at us.
- We should expect mud to be thrown at us instead of roses. Then there will be no disappointments.
- Though difficult, we should try to cultivate non-attachment. Alone we come, alone we go. Non-attachment is happiness in this world.
- Unmindful of the poisonous darts of uncurbed tongues, alone we should wander serving others to the best of our ability.
- It is rather strange that great men have been slandered, vilified, poisoned, crucified or shot. Great Socrates was poisoned. Noble Jesus Christ was ruthlessly crucified. Harmless Mahatma Gandhi was shot.

Well, is it dangerous to be too good?

Yes, during their lifetime they were criticized, attacked, and killed. After death, they were deified and honoured.

Great men are indifferent to honour or dishonour. They are not upset when they are criticized or maligned for they work not for name or honour. They are indifferent whether others recognise their services or not. To work, they have the right but not to the fruit thereof.

Praise and Blame

Praise and blame are two more worldly conditions that affect mankind. It is natural to be elated when praised and to be depressed when blamed. Amidst praise and blame, the Buddha says, the wise exhibit neither elation nor depression. Like a solid rock that is not shaken by the wind they stand unmoved.

Praise, if worthy, is pleasing to the ears. If unworthy, as in the case of flattery, though pleasing, it is deceptive. But they are all sounds which will produce no effect if they do not reach our ears.

From a worldly standpoint, a word of praise goes a long way. By praising a little, a favour can easily be obtained. One word of merited praise is sufficient to attract an audience before one speaks. If, at the outset, a speaker praises the audience, he will have an attentive ear. If he criticizes the audience at the outset, the response will not be satisfactory.

The cultured do not resort to flattery; nor do they wish to be flattered by others. The praiseworthy, they praise without being envious. The blameworthy, they blame not contemptuously but out of compassion with the object of reforming them.

Many who knew the Buddha intimately, extolled his virtues in their own way. One Upali, a millionaire, a new follower, praised the Buddha enumerating a hundred virtues extempore. Nine sterling virtues of the Buddha that were current in his time are still being recited by his followers looking at his image. They are a subject of meditation to the devout. These well-merited virtues are still a great inspiration to his followers.

How about blame?

The Buddha says: "They who speak much are blamed. They who speak little are blamed: They who are silent are also blamed. In this world there is none who is not blamed!"

Blame seems to be a universal legacy of mankind.

The majority of the people in the world, remarks the Buddha, are ill-disciplined. Just as an elephant in the battlefield endures all arrows shot at him, even so, the Buddha suffers all insults.

The deluded and the wicked are prone to seek only the ugliness in others but not the good and beautiful.

None, with the single exception of a Buddha, is perfectly good. Nobody is totally bad either. There is evil in the best of us. There is good in the worst of us.

"He who silences himself like a cracked gong when

attacked, insulted and abused, he, I say the Buddha exhorts, "is in the presence of Nibbana although he has not yet attained Nibbana."

One may work with the best of motives. But the outside world very often misconstrues him and will impute motives never even dreamt by him.

One may serve and help others to the best of one's ability sometimes by incurring debts or selling one's articles or property to save a friend in trouble; but later, the deluded world is so constituted that those very persons whom one has helped will find fault with him, blackmail him, blemish his good character and will rejoice in his downfall.

In the Jataka stories, it is stated that Guttila the musician taught everything he knew to his pupil without a closed fist, but the ungrateful young man unsuccessfully tried to compete with his teacher and ruin him.

On one occasion, the Buddha was invited by a brahmin for alms to his house.

As invited, the Buddha, visited his house. Instead of entertaining him, he poured a torrent of abuse with the filthiest words.

The Buddha politely inquired, "Do visitors come to your house, good Brahmin?"

"Yes," he replied.

"What do you do when they come?"

"Oh, we prepare a sumptuous feast."

"If they fail to turn up?"

“Why we gladly partake of it.”

“Well, good brahmin, you have invited me for alms and you have entertained me with abuse. I accept nothing. Please take it back.”

The Buddha did not retaliate. “Retaliate not,” the Buddha exhorts. “Hatreds do not cease through hatreds but through love alone they cease.”

There was no religious teacher so highly praised as the Buddha and so severely criticized, reviled and blamed as the Buddha. Such is the fate of great men.

The Buddha was accused of murdering a woman assisted by his disciples. Non-Buddhists severely criticized the Buddha and his disciples to such an extent that the Venerable Ananda appealed to the Buddha to leave for another village.

“How, Ananda, if those villagers also abuse us?”

“Well then, Lord, we will proceed to another village.”

“Then, Ananda, the whole of India will have no place for us. Be patient. These abuses will automatically cease.”

Magandinya, a lady of the harem, had a grudge against the Buddha for speaking ill of her attractive figure when her father, through ignorance, wished to give her in marriage to the Buddha. She hired drunkards to insult the Buddha in public. With perfect equanimity, the Buddha endured the insults.

Insults are the common lot of humanity. The more you work and the greater you become, the more you are

subject to insult and humiliation.

Socrates was insulted by his own wife. Whenever he went out to help others his intolerant wife used to scold him. One day as she was unwell, she failed to perform her usual unruly task. Socrates left home on that day with a sad face. His friends inquired why he was sad. He replied that his wife did not scold him on that day as she was unwell.

“Well, you ought to be happy for not getting that unwelcome scolding,” remarked his friends.

“Oh no! When she scolds me, I get an opportunity to practise patience. Today I missed that opportunity. That is the reason why I am sad,” answered the philosopher.

These are memorable lessons for all.

When insulted, we should think we are given an opportunity to practise patience. Instead of being offended, we should be grateful to our adversaries.

Happiness and Sorrow

Happiness and sorrow are the last pair of opposites. They are the most powerful factors that affect mankind.

What can be borne with ease is *sukha* (happiness); what is difficult to bear is *dukkha* (sorrow).

Ordinary happiness is the gratification of a desire. As soon as the thing desired is gained then we desire some other kind of happiness. So insatiate are our selfish desires.

The enjoyment of sensual pleasures is the highest

and only happiness to an average person. There is no doubt that there is some momentary happiness in the anticipation, gratification and recollection of such material pleasures. This kind of happiness is highly prized by the sensualist, but it is illusory and temporary.

Can material possessions give one genuine happiness? If so, millionaires should not feel frustrated with life. In a certain country which has reached the zenith of material progress, a good number suffer from mental diseases. Why should it be so if material possessions alone can give happiness?

Can dominion over the whole world produce true happiness? Alexander, who triumphantly marched to India, conquering the lands on the way, sighed for not having more pieces of earth to conquer.

Very often the lives of statesmen who would wield power are at stake. The pathetic cases of Mahatma Gandhi and John F. Kennedy are illustrative examples.

Real happiness is found within, and is not to be defined in terms of wealth, power, honours, or conquests.

If such worldly possessions are forcibly obtained, or are misdirected, or even viewed with attachment, they will be a source of pain and sorrow for the possessors.

What is happiness to one may not be happiness for another. What is meat and drink to one may be poison to another.

The Buddha enumerates four kinds of happiness for a layman. They are the happiness of possession (*atthi sukha*) – health, wealth, longevity, beauty, joy, strength,

property, children, etc.

The second source of happiness is derived by the enjoyment of such possessions (*bhoga sukha*).

Ordinarily, men and women wish to enjoy themselves. The Buddha does not advise all to renounce their worldly pleasures and retire to solitude.

The enjoyment of wealth lies not only in using it for ourselves but also in giving it for the welfare of others. What we eat is only temporary. What we preserve we leave and go. What we give we take with us. We are remembered forever by the good deeds we have done with our worldly possessions.

Not falling into debt (*anana sukha*) is another source of happiness. If we are contented with what we have and if we are economical, we need not be in debt to anyone. Debtors live in mental agony and are under obligation to their creditors. Though poor, when debt free, we feel relieved and are mentally happy.

Leading a blameless life (*anavajja sukha*) is one of the best sources of happiness for a layman. A blameless person is a blessing to himself and to others. He is admired by all and feels happier, being affected by the peaceful vibrations of others. It should be stated, however, that it is very difficult to get a good name from all. The noble-minded persons are concerned only with a blameless life and are indifferent to external approbation.

The majority in this world delight themselves in enjoying pleasures while some others seek delight in renouncing them. Non-attachment or the transcending

of material pleasures is happiness to the spiritual. Nibbanic bliss, which is the bliss of relief from suffering, is the highest form of happiness.

Ordinary happiness we welcome, but not its opposite — sorrow which is rather difficult to endure.

Sorrow or suffering comes in different guises.

We suffer when we are subjected to old age which is natural. With equanimity we have to bear the sufferings of old age.

More painful than sufferings due to old age are sufferings caused by disease. Even the slightest toothache or headache is sometimes unbearable.

When we are subject to disease, without being worried, we should be able to bear it at any cost. Well, we must console ourselves thinking that we have escaped from a much more serious disease.

Very often we are separated from our near and dear ones. Such separation causes great pain of mind. We should understand that all association must end with separation. Here is a good opportunity to practise equanimity.

More often than not we are compelled to be united with the unpleasant which we detest. We should be able to bear them. Perhaps we are reaping the effects of our own Kamma, past or present. We should try to accommodate ourselves to the new situation or try to overcome the obstacles by some other means.

Even the Buddha, a perfect being, who had destroyed all defilements, had to endure physical

suffering caused by disease and accidents.

The Buddha was constantly subjected to headaches. His last illness caused him much physical suffering. As a result of Devadatta's hurling a rock to kill him, his foot was wounded by a splinter which necessitated an operation. Sometimes he was compelled to starve. Due to the disobedience of his own pupils, he was compelled to retire to a forest for three months. In a forest on a couch of leaves spread on a rough ground, facing piercing cold winds, he maintained perfect equanimity. Amidst pain and happiness he lived with a balanced mind.

Death is the greatest sorrow we are compelled to face in the course of our wanderings in samsara. Sometimes, death comes not singly but in numbers which may be difficult to endure.

When a mother was questioned why she did not weep over the tragic death of her only son, she replied, "Uninvited he came. Uninformed he went. As he came so he went. Why should we weep? What avails weeping?"

As fruits fall from a tree — tender, ripe or old — even so we die in our infancy, prime of mankind, or in old age.

The sun rises in the East only to set in the West.

Flowers bloom in the morning to fade in the evening.

Inevitable death which comes to all without exception we have to face with perfect equanimity.

" Just as the earth whatever is thrown

Upon her, whether sweet or foul,
Indifferent is to all alike,
Nor hatred shows, nor amity,
So likewise he is good or ill,
Must even-balanced ever be."

The Buddha says, "When touched by worldly conditions, the mind of an Arahant never wavers."

Amidst gain and loss, honour and dishonour, praise and blame, happiness and sorrow, let us try to maintain a balanced mind. ■